A COMPREHENSIVE ANALYSIS OF THE VALLETTA 2018 CULTURAL PROGRAMME

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INTRODUCTION

On the 27th September 2017, the Valletta 2018 Foundation launched its Cultural Programme for 2018 and presented the 140 projects and 400 events which will take place throughout the European Capital of Culture (ECoC) year. The programme will officially open with a celebration event taking place on the 20th January 2018. However, the Valletta ECoC journey started long before this date.

Valletta was selected as an ECoC on the 12th October 2012. The Foundation, which spearheaded the application process, has been responsible for the organisation of the ECoC and the creation and implementation of the Cultural Programme. As has been identified in various ECoC evaluations (ECORYS 2012, 2013, 2014; Palmer/Rae 2014a, 2014b) the Cultural Programme, is continuously in development and changes are frequent.

Valletta 2018 is no exception as changes within the Foundation and in the development of the programme have been ongoing. Changes in artistic direction and senior management posts throughout these five years were discussed widely and attracted significant media attention and debates within the artistic community. In July 2017 Catherine Tabone replaced Karsten Xuereb as the Executive Director of the Foundation. Joanne Attard Mallia, formerly Programming Officer within the Foundation, replaced Margerita Pulé as Programming Coordinator.

The process of developing an ECoC Cultural Programme can be described in itself as a process of change: revising and redefining objectives; reframing themes and pivoting direction; identifying new target groups; developing ongoing projects, negotiating new ones while abandoning projects that do not work out; negotiating new collaborations while grappling with organisational change and changes in project team members and artistic collaborators. These changes make the research and evaluation of the programme's objectives and effectiveness ever more pertinent.

The study focuses on the Valletta 2018 Cultural Programme life-cycle and the changes taking place over the years - from the development to the production stage. In 2015, the focus was the analysis of the programme's vision as reflected in the published material and as experienced by the content programmers. In 2016, the programme was analysed as a work in progress and in 2017 information could be gathered on the final stages of development as the programme now enters into full swing.

The study has 3 objectives (a) to explore development and implementation of the Cultural Programme; (b) to analyse the factors that influence the creation of the Cultural Programme projects; (c) to track the long-term development of the programme's effectiveness in terms of the cultural offer, European dimension and cultural participation.

METHODOLOGY

As illustrated in Table 1, this study adopts a mixed method approach to reflect multi-dimensional aspects of the Cultural Programme and the developments unfolding over the years. Unlike studies that are post-evaluation (ECORYS 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014,2015), the ongoing evaluation implies that members of the research team can directly observe and survey the individual projects as they progress. Previous studies have noted the limitation of conducting interviews after the ECoC event because of the reliance on respondents' recollections and perceptions (ECORYS, 2014). This study has the advantage of analysing the programme while it is still in progress.

Table 1: Methodology 2015 - 2018

Methodology	2015	2016	2017	2018
Institutional analysis	X			X
Focus groups	X	X	X	X
In-depth interviews	X	X	X	X
Online questionnaire		X	X	X
Project visits		X	X	X

Figure 1: Culture Programme development to date:

2015

Focus on refining vision and objectives;

Development and piloting of initial projects.

2016

Consolidation of projects to be included in 2018 Programme;

Greater emphasis on international dimension.

2017

Finalisation and refinement of Cultural Programme

Launch of Cultural Programme

In 2017, data was gathered primarily through in-depth interviews, focus groups, project visits and an online questionnaire. The interviews and focus group studies were carried out with:
1. Valletta 2018 Foundation Programming team members;
2. Creators, producers and strand coordinators of projects in the Cultural Programme;
3. Independent artists and groups participating in the programme.

The interviews and focus groups were transcribed and coded according to themes and research questions namely (i) cultural offer and programming balance and engagement; (ii) European collaboration; and (iii) audience participation.

In the first year of study, it was established that ongoing updates are necessary to ensure that the research findings are up-to-date and reflect the changes. Consultation meetings with the Programming Coordinator, Margerita Pulè and Joanne Attard Mallia from July 2017, were organised to ensure that the developments were tracked throughout the year.

The study attempts to achieve reliability by triangulating the data collected from the institutional analysis, interviews, focus groups, project visits and the online questionnaire. This methodology is adequate to gain detailed and in-depth perspectives on the ECoC Cultural Programme. However, in-depth interviews have their limitations because of biases by both the interviewees and interviewers (Blagojevic, 2016). As identified in the first two years of the study, caution is needed so as not to take personal interpretations for granted because of what Tinic refers to as the "situatedness" (Caldwell, 2008, p.8). In interviews, it may sometimes be problematic to filter through the self-promotion. Caldwell (2008) invites production studies researchers to sift through the personal branding and industry parlance (p. 318).

Moreover, studies on events commissioned by event organisers also tend to focus on positive aspects and neglect other critical aspects or do not focus sufficiently on social impact (Richards, 2013). To address this weakness, the research attempts to gather data from a variety of sources to widen its scope to include more critical perspectives.

To address these methodological difficulties, an online survey for project leaders was conducted in 2017 as an additional methodology to ensure coverage of a wide-range of projects happening in 2018. Other studies (ECORYS 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014; Quinn & O'Halloran, 2006) have also used online surveys to ensure a greater response from ECoC contributors. To date, the response to the online questionnaire was low, with 28 responses received out of 72 invitations. Despite the low turnout, the outcomes from the online questionnaire give some interesting insights into the programme, which are included as an Annex to this report.

The online questionnaire method will also be used in 2018 to reach a large number of contributors and artists and to investigate how audience participation strategies are implemented. The research can, therefore, evaluate the progress from the planning phase to the actual execution of the programme. The follow-ups to ensure an improved response rate will be intensified and the questionnaires will be sent individually to the producers on completion of their project, instead of being sent all at once at the end.

FINDINGS

The Development and Diversity of the Cultural Offer

The finalised programme, as launched in September 2017, includes around 400 events and an estimated 140 projects. Palmer/Rae (2004) identify various elements that influence the range and balance an ECoC Cultural Programme including the size, scale and range of different genres. This study looks into these elements to understand the diversity of the Cultural Programme.

Throughout 2017, the Foundation continued to manage its programme by grouping the projects according to genre or type with a coordinator responsible for each strand. The categorisation is made either by the type of artistic discipline or by the theme (e.g. migration) or by the kind of target group and interaction with the audience (e.g. children, young people). The strands are useful to help in the internal management of the programme and to ensure that there are various projects covering different elements and coordinators.

Regarding the cultural offer and programme balance, Programming Coordinator Joanne Attard Mallia spoke of a wide range of projects in the programme, maybe overwhelmingly so (interview October 2017). The programme is taking place in both public and private spaces, and ranges from huge spectacles to community projects, from the contemporary to the traditional and from the local to the international. While the slant of programming efforts have been clearly towards contemporary projects, most online questionnaire respondents described their projects as including elements that are both traditional and contemporary.

In reflecting upon the development of the programme, the Programming Coordinator also spoke of the need for more public participatory events which do not necessarily require long-term involvement but could take place within a day, and therefore encourage more participation. Moreover, she reflected on the need to have more new work that was created by emerging local artists, as opposed to having international new work with the participation of Maltese artists. Additionally, she observed that there was an expected resistance from those artists who position themselves as anti-establishment and a hesitation to approach the Foundation from those who lack confidence. The common thread between artists who are part of the programme is that they know how to present themselves and know how to use the system to their advantage.

Focus group respondents from the Programming team also spoke of the range of projects targeting different audiences. The main concerns centred on whether all the work that is being done has sufficient visibility and is being communicated to the general public widely enough. This difficulty was voiced in various stakeholder interviews with project leaders and creators who recognised a tension between promoting the Cultural Programme in its entirety and promoting the individual productions. The promotion and communication efforts of disseminating information by categories (children, young people) or strand (music) were discussed.

The scale of the programme brings along its challenges, and despite still being approached for new projects, the Foundation has decided to now draw a line and stop accepting more proposals. The large scale of Valletta 2018 can prove arduous especially when it comes to resources, particularly of the more technical roles required to run the programme. The solution to this was to always look at the year and the different elements and phases rather than one whole.

As expressed by Sarah Borg, a member of the Programming team, "the programme is staggered, so resources are shifted that way. You have limited resources, but it's all about the timing. I feel that it's working out due to our sense of organisation."

Furthermore, since the programme is taking place over one year, the various projects are at different stages of their lifespan, meaning that while some are in full production mode, others are still at the contract stage. Therefore, in 2017 the team had the task of both delivering the projects taking place, while simultaneously dealing with future projects. In fact, according to Programming Officer Giuliana Barbaro Sant, one of the most challenging aspects about going into the actual year is trying to keep track of all the paperwork while still being actively engaged with the programme, in order to gauge how people are responding to everything, and whether any last minute changes are required.

Throughout the process of programming, the team have discovered more about the nature of the industry in Malta. For instance, since the pool of people working in the local performing arts sector at a professional level is limited, Valletta 2018 are actually at a stage where several performances are competing for the same people. Moreover, the team encountered a general lack of production knowledge by local artists, such as issues related to VAT or technical requirements needed for their project.

Regarding local artists' openness to international collaboration, programming interviewees note that the more established artists dealt with such opportunities very well, while others were more territorial over their work. However, they were hopeful that over the past few years there had been a rise in collaborative practices such as curatorship and in creating work of high quality.

In analysing the development of the programme over the past three years, it is clear that change is part of the entire programming process. Reflecting on changes that have occurred in the programme since its inception, the Manager of the Valletta Design Cluster, Caldon Mercieca, believes that even though individual projects have changed since the Bid Book, the core values of the Foundation have remained strong. These include the objectives of incorporating the different sectors of society and expanding the portfolio of artists and that of the classical genres that currently dominate the local scene:

> *"You can look at a typical arts festival programme that takes place in Malta, and you can contrast it to our programme. A festival in Malta usually veers towards the more traditional in terms of the formatting and the genres and the disciplines. This is completely different. Also, there is a powerful international dimension."*

The European and international dimension of the programme is another critical objective as discussed in the next section.

The European Dimension in Valletta 2018

In the 2016 study, an apparent shift was observed in the programming preparation phase which showed an intensified effort towards the European and international dimension when the team deliberately sought to explore European connections (Blagojevic, 2016).

This conscious effort has continued throughout 2017 so that the Cultural Programme now includes more European elements either through the participation of artists or links made by Maltese artists with international artist networks.

When asked about the European dimension, Programming Coordinator Joanne Attard Mallia pointed towards the number of collaborations and networks that have been created and will have been created by the end of 2018. Moreover, local projects are being encouraged to be exported post-Valletta 2018 to keep the collaborations alive. Regarding its international dimension, Caldon Mercieca also mentioned the focus that there is on the Euro-Med aspect, whereby communities that would normally not work together are coming together for a Valletta 2018 collaboration, as is the case of a project involving Israelite and Arab communities.

Being part of the Cultural Programme can also be perceived as an opportunity to connect to the European community and to showcase work abroad. 46% of online questionnaire respondents stated that their work would be showcased outside Malta. Moreover, both focus group and online questionnaire respondents agreed that their projects covered European themes and/or themes that were relevant to international audiences.

Cultural Participation

From the early stages of the Bid Book phase, the Valletta 2018 Foundation set out on the ambitious task of creating an inclusive Cultural Programme that would engage various target audiences. The Bid Book (September 2012) highlights the concerns on audience participation in the local cultural scene:

> ''Valletta 2018 also faces a key challenge in breaking down entrenched societal barriers to audience development. Culture Statistics issued by Eurostat indicate that we have among Europe's lowest levels of audience participation in comparative cultural activities.''

The Cultural Programme publication published in September 2017, clearly sets this agenda on cultural participation:

> "With the community at the heart of island life, encouraging active participation in the arts is one of the highest goals of our ECoC. Valletta 2018's community projects bring culture to everyone's doorstep, uniting the traditional vision of a Mediterranean life enriched by close ties to family, friends and neighbours with the islands' growing creative practices" (p. 46).

The study looks at the Cultural Programme and how it is shaped by the needs of audiences and particular target groups in mind. In 2015 and 2016, programmers, project leaders and artists interviewed for this research study shared a common concern that reaching out to audiences is not without difficulty and that increasing audience participation requires a significant cultural change.

In this year's focus groups, with the Cultural Programme in place, the Programming team members spoke about moulding the marketing strategies or engagement techniques according to the specific projects and target groups, always being sensitive to their particular needs. Different strategies are used depending on the project and locality. For instance, in the Design4DCity Birżebbuġa workshop, the project coordinators worked closely with the Local Council. This was possible because there was a good, positive relationship with the community.

Regarding disadvantaged groups and inclusion, the Programming Coordinator spoke about targeting children, seniors and people with disabilities, and how the Foundation was hiring a specialist to help them in understanding how to be more inclusive in targeting such groups. Most of the questionnaire respondents identified a particular group that their project was targetting. Moreover, the majority of interviewees agreed that reaching out to audiences was a shared responsibility of the Foundation and the individual producers participating in the Cultural Programme. Most interviewees identified ways in which they are interacting with audiences: co-creation and co-design, workshops and training or simply spectatorship.

All the members agreed on the nature of the participation that they wanted for Valletta 2018. One of the Programming Officers clearly stated that the objective of the Foundation has always been that of legacy through participation, "quality participation as opposed to numbers."
Another project leader echoed her sentiments in saying that the experience is central to everything:
> "I hope people are transformed from a state of passivity to a state of being active. As someone active, you believe in the power to change things. Ultimately, from an ethical or moral perspective, you are actually spending public money to make people active citizens. That's why a workshop is more effective than a massive spectacle."

In the focus group with the Programming team, the Ġewwa Barra project was often mentioned as an example of a project which adopts a community-based approach and which encapsulates the ethos of Valletta 2018.

Other members of the team agreed that ultimately it was not the brand of Valletta 2018 that needed to be remembered or to stand the test of time, but it was about legacy as is summarised in the words of one of the respondents:
> "It's about the effect that you leave behind. What comes after Valletta 2018? We are aiming for this to be a sustainable project […] People can now see participating in a workshop or creating a work of art as a very tangible possibility."

One of the Valletta 2018 team members, who is a resident in Valletta himself has seen a shift in audience involvement from Valletta's community which he finds encouraging. He stated that for years people from Valletta have not been very interested in much else apart from football and the festa, but more recently he is seeing residents in other types of cultural events, such as a play or a concert: "We are getting there, very slowly, but we are getting there."

As Programming Coordinator, Joanne Attard Mallia echoed these sentiments and she said that her personal target is to have participation by people who would normally not participate in specific events or by those who are only closed off to particular art forms and not others. She also hoped that Valletta 2018 would help Malta move away from rigid ideas of what constitutes being an artist and that more people would be encouraged to take artistic paths in their lives without being held back by the self-imposed boundaries.

Apart from participation from an audience point of view, the Foundation also aims towards a cultural shift in how people perceive opportunities in the cultural sector. The vision is for people to be further encouraged to train in areas such as lighting design, sound design, production management, curation and other skills that would lead to a career in the creative industries.

The Ġewwa Barra project presents a relevant case study (see Annex 4) and was selected for in-depth analysis because of its community based approach with Valletta residents. Project Coordinator Victor Jacono commented on the anthropological approach where the focus was community engagement as opposed to the artistic outcome whereby "the art becomes an instrument to engage the community." The first step was interacting with the residents and eliciting ideas from them for them to have a voice from its inception. For this project, the Foundation's main aim was for the project and process to be an empowering exercise for the residents.

CONCLUSIONS & WAY FORWARD

Clearly, 2017 was a crucial year for the development of the Cultural Programme - a hectic year for the members of the Foundation and for the producers as they prepare for the unprecedented range of cultural activities to be held throughout 2018.

In 2018, with the full implementation of the Cultural Programme, the focus will be the onsite evaluation through project visits. At present, a project visit schedule is being drawn up so that different research assistants will be assigned to the individual performances. For each visit, a data sheet will be inputted to a central system so that the information on each project visit is compiled.

The focus groups will be organised in the second quarter of 2018 with the Foundation's Programming team, Strand Coordinators and producers. In-depth interviews will be arranged with foreign producers who will not be able to attend focus groups. An online questionnaire will be sent to all producers soon as their performance is finalised so that data is collected throughout 2018.

The regular meetings with the Programming Coordinator and team members will be organised to ensure periodic updates.

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